

Taking on Trauma

The first steps to becoming a trauma-informed school

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

We live in a traumatic world. Parents and families are under stress, some neighborhoods are violent and unsafe, and children are witnessing and experiencing violence and aggression. As a result, educators must understand the impact of trauma on students and find ways to implement trauma-informed practices. This article offers an introduction to trauma, its impact, and the strategies to use in leading a school to be trauma-sensitive.

The Initial ACE Study

A landmark study co-sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and health insurer Kaiser Permanente in the late 1990s found that a large percentage of the 17,000 middle-class adults surveyed had experienced at least one traumatic experience as a child. The same study found that almost 25 percent had experienced multiple events of trauma as children, and sufferers of multiple traumas tended to develop health problems as adults.

The study also identified a set of life events that seem to cause significant stress and health impacts as adults, coining the term “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) to describe them. They include:

- Substance abuse in the home;
- Parental separation or divorce;
- Mental illness in the home;
- Exposure to domestic violence;
- A suicidal household member;
- Death of a parent or loved one;
- Parental incarceration; and
- Experience of abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) or neglect (emotional or physical).



The study scored each ACE as a point; the more traumatic experiences a person had, the higher their score. And the higher a person’s score, the higher the impact of the trauma.

Trauma-Informed Practices

More recent studies have focused on trauma as it occurs with children. Nearly 35 million children experienced some form of childhood trauma, according to the 2011–2012 National Survey of Children’s Health. In school, children might express

their experiences with trauma in many ways, from withdrawal to striking out against others.

To begin the work of becoming a trauma-informed school and implementing trauma-friendly practices, focus on two areas: the impact of trauma on the teachers and other adults who work in your school and the impact of trauma on your students. Start with the adults, since they might have experienced multiple traumatic events as children and might bring those issues to work.

To help impact teachers and adults, school leaders can:

- Be aware of the potential for trauma and its impact upon the adults in your school. Use this awareness to understand the behaviors and attitudes you see in teachers and other adults.
- Develop a climate and culture in which teachers and other adults feel safe enough to talk about any issues they have experienced in the past. Use staff meetings and implement routines to develop an open, supportive environment that helps adults develop supportive relationships.
- Build an awareness among teachers and other adults of the “triggers” that affect their responses to trauma and children experiencing trauma. By understanding such triggers, teachers can suspend instinctual reactions and seek to understand what might be behind the behaviors they see in their classrooms.

These and other strategies will help you begin to address trauma from the inside out and will help you care for the adults who will, in turn, take care of children.

Student Strategies

School leaders can also implement strategies and ideas to help provide sound school climates and cultures for students experiencing the impact of trauma. Here are three initial strategies you can implement to begin to address the issue of student trauma in your school:


- Use the understanding and awareness of trauma you developed in adult staff to try to understand, rather than react to, student behaviors. The change in mindset will help you and the

teachers in your school develop a climate and culture that helps students address these issues and develop resilience.

- Implement systems that provide stable, predictable school and classroom learning routines and environments.
- Develop resources such as student assistance or teacher assistance teams that work to mediate misbehaviors. Collaborative structures will help support trauma-informed efforts with children.

There is no single program that can address all impacts or behaviors associated with childhood trauma. Since the effects of trauma are long-term and will be expressed differently by different individuals, a school’s efforts to understand

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trauma and provide stability might take time. But even if there is no immediate, observable change, your efforts can help both children and adults who are dealing with the effects of childhood trauma. 

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